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Hiding C.I.A. Blunders

By William Wilson

ST. LOUIS — From its inception, the Central Intelligence Agency has often failed in its duties and responsibilities to the American people. Despite the long list of its intelligence failures, or perhaps because of them, the C.I.A. has proposed a charter revision that would enable it to conceal all incompetence in the future by sealing its records from individuals seeking information on possible agency wrongdoing or seeking redress for grievances. If the law locked the files, citizens would be denied the right to recover damages when they were hurt by the agency.

C.I.A. secrecy can change history. In 1975, several so-called African revolutionaries arrived in New York City and handed a passionate appeal to the United Nations General Assembly urging African states to support the Western-backed forces in the Angolan civil war. Later, in news conferences and informal meetings with reporters in New York and Washington, they described the glorious victories of their democratic forces and the horrid atrocities of their enemies. They appealed for more money and arms to fight their good fight. You might remember that they were heroes.

Unfortunately, the entire affair was the product of the imagination of a C.I.A. group operating under the code name PLIACADMUS, which denoted the propaganda arm of the C.I.A.'s clandestine Angolan operation. Some of this information was made public in the book "In Search of Enemies," by John Stockwell, who was the C.I.A.'s Angolan task force commander. But you wouldn't be able to know that if the proposed charter revision had been law, unless someone had decided to spend 10 years in prison for the privilege of informing you.

The public and the news media were impressed with the C.I.A.'s sideshow, and so were Gary Acker and Daniel Gearhart, and they decided to join these "heroes." A C.I.A.-hired recruiter made all of the arrangements. So the public was duped and a couple of guys were used. Within days of their arrival in Angola, Mr. Acker and Mr. Gearhart were captured by Cuban soldiers and soldiers of the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola, and in 1976 were tried as mercenaries of the National Front for the Liberation of Angola. The State Department in effect joined the enemy Angolans as accusers, charging that the Americans had "gone over there on their own in violation of U. S. law"; the C.I.A., going a step further, said that it was "not very interested" in them. If the proposed charter revision were law at the time, that's all you would be able to remember — except that Mr. Gearhart was executed by a firing squad and that Mr. Acker is still serving his 18-year sentence, in Luanda, Angola. The C.I.A.'s duplicity would remain secret forever and could not legally be disclosed — even to the family of the dead man. Even if the C.I.A. had provided exculpatory evidence, under the proposed charter it would have been illegal for me, as Mr. Gearhart's counsel, to have used it in defense of an American on trial for his life. The truth might have saved Daniel Gearhart.

Both Mr. Stockwell and Frank Snepp, a C.I.A. analyst in Vietnam and author of "A Decent Interval," state that the officers who left behind identification files of C.I.A. employees in Vietnam were rewarded with promotions and choice reassignments. After all, sloughing off numbers of Vietnamese is easy if C.I.A. secrecy can be assured, but if the American people are guaranteed access to the truth, then the agency's international reputation would suffer, and Americans might not be eager to join the next lost cause.

With the proposed closed system and with judicious manipulation of the news media by trained experts, the illusion of security might then be restored to full luster. And then we would not learn about, say, Dr. Frank Olson, a civilian biochemist at the Army's top-secret germ-warfare laboratories at Fort Detrick, Md., who plunged to his death from a Manhattan hotel window in 1953 da
gave him LSD in a drink in an experiment without his knowledge. He had gone to New York City to see a psychiatrist.

We wouldn't know, unless we remembered, that the C.I.A. trafficked in heroin. We learned that from the book "The Politics of Heroin in Southeast Asia," by Alfred A. McCoy, Cathleen V. Read and Leonard P. Adams.

We won't know, unless we can remember, that the intelligence agency cannot gather intelligence without major failures. It was unable to anticipate the danger to our embassy in Teheran and the likelihood of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Of course it failed to predict the 1968 Tet offensive in Vietnam. Further, do we have to recall the humiliation of the United States at the Bay of Pigs? In other words, there were C.I.A. fiascos both before and after restraints were introduced by Congress.

In 1963, Harry S. Truman, who instituted the C.I.A. during his Presidency, wrote: "We have grown up as a nation, respected for our free institutions and for our ability to maintain a free and open society. There is something about the way the C.I.A. has been functioning that is casting a shadow over our historic position, and I feel that we need to correct it." He is still right.

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